**Ax Handle Saturday, 1960: A day of defiance in black and white**

**Sit-ins at a '60s lunch joint set off ax handles - and a city on edge**

By [Deirdre Conner](http://jacksonville.com/authors/deirdre-conner-0) Sat, Aug 21, 2010 @ 11:21 pm | updated Mon, Sep 19, 2011 @ 11:20 am

http://jacksonville.com/sites/all/themes/whitelabel/images/blank.gifBack   Photo: 1 of 6  [Next [http://jacksonville.com/sites/all/themes/whitelabel/images/blank.gif](http://jacksonville.com/news/metro/2010-08-22/story/ax-handle-saturday-1960-day-defiance-black-and-white#1)](http://jacksonville.com/news/metro/2010-08-22/story/ax-handle-saturday-1960-day-defiance-black-and-white" \l "1)

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Downtown sandwich shop Desert Rider is nothing if not old-fashioned.

If you stop by the stalwart Hogan Street lunch spot, order from the menu on the wall - you had better know what a "Donna's Fave" is. Come in on a hot summer day, and they'll offer you a refill on the cold Coke you're slurping as you wait for your sandwich. Have a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and you'll find yourself surrounded by a diverse lunch crowd.

In a booth, a bus driver reads the paper on his break. At the counter, two businessmen check their smartphones. A stooped retiree rolls her oxygen tank to the cash register. A mother consults the menu while her daughter clutches a library book.

It seems hard to believe that just steps outside what is now Desert Rider, violence once erupted over something so simple as that - just lunch.

On a sweltering summer day 50 years ago, the street outside was shattered with screams and spattered with blood.

Black youth, attempting to sit down at a whites-only lunch counter for hamburgers and egg salad sandwiches, were accosted by an angry mob wielding ax handles.

And suddenly, all of downtown became a melee, leaving dozens of bystanders wounded - and giving Jacksonville a national reputation for violence.

Aug. 27, 1960, now known as [Ax Handle Saturday](http://jacksonville.com/news/wikijax/ax-handle-saturday), became a turning point in the city's race relations. Half a century later, some are hoping it again will be a rallying cry.

**Some things change, some don't**

A few blocks from Desert Rider, a seeming embodiment of integration, sits its antithesis.

At the county courthouse, the problems brought about by poverty and discrimination and aggravated by drugs seem endless. There, the aftereffects of segregation linger in the form of stubbornly wide disparities in economic opportunities, education and health.

Many of those stark disparities first came to light in a 1946 study - the first of its kind - called "Jacksonville Looks at its Negro Community." And today, it illustrates much of what has and has not changed since the post-World War II era.

In the early 1940s, about 27 percent of the state's population was African-Americans, yet they made up 60 percent of prison admissions, according to the report. Today, 16 percent of the state's overall population is African-American, yet they make up 46 percent of admitted prison inmates.

In 2008 and in 1946, the rate of infant mortality was twice as high among African-Americans as for whites in Jacksonville. And nationally, income inequality between black and white families has not significantly changed in the past 35 years, a Brookings Institution study found.

Yet other problems have dramatically improved since that time. In 1946, there was not a single public swimming pool, beach or park open to blacks in Jacksonville, the only city of its size in the state without such access at that time.

In 1946, there were no African-American police officers in the city.

In 1960, segregationist politics still ruled in Jacksonville and Florida. Fifty years later, the nation's first black president was helped into office by Florida's support and an evenly divided electorate in Jacksonville. Most whites in Jacksonville didn't vote for Obama, but without those who did, he might not have won the state.

**'We are going to be all right'**

Alton Yates never got that hamburger when he sat down at the Woolworth's lunch counter on Aug. 13, 1960, the day of the first demonstration.

It would be months before Yates, one of the leaders of the NAACP Youth Council, would be served there.

"Things are just so much better today as a result, I believe, of the demonstrations and the meetings after the demonstrations," Yates said. "Conditions for people of color were awful."

Fifty years later, there are still times when Yates struggles to make sense of the racial tensions that exist in the city. He brings up the recent controversy over the appointment of a Muslim university professor to the city's Human Rights Commission, and sighs deeply.

"In this day and age, how do you discriminate against anyone because of their race, because of their sexual orientation, because of their religious background?" he said. "The kind of shame that I felt when I was going through [Ax Handle Saturday] I felt then."

Yet Yates said he feels inspired when talking to youth. He sometimes speaks at Rutledge Pearson Elementary, named for the social studies teacher that inspired the Youth Council members.

"When I listen to those young people, I know we are going to be all right," he said.

Rodney Hurst, president of the Youth Council during the demonstrations, was 16 years old at the time and has recently written a book about the experience. He's hoping the commemoration of Ax Handle Saturday will invite more conversation about black history and race relations.

"We still have lingering problems to this day," he said. More direct conversation is lacking, Hurst said.

Still, there are some efforts under way. A group of nonprofits, spearheaded by the Community Foundation in Jacksonville and OneJax, have undertaken an initiative called Project Breakthrough, intended to begin dismantling structural racism in the city. It also tackles some of the often hidden problems that exacerbate disparities. One example is mortgage denial rates: They are vastly different for blacks versus whites, a disparity that many researchers believe cannot be explained by finances alone.

"There are some amazing conversations going on right now," said Skip Cramer, executive director of Jacksonville Community Council Inc. The nonprofit closely studies the city, including a regular race relations report.

Such conversations are no longer optional, Cramer said, with America and Northeast Florida becoming more racially and ethnically diverse.

"It's different - a lot different - than August 1960," he said.

And addressing disparities in income and education could make or break the city's economy, Cramer said.

**The day of a turning point**

Some of the footsteps on Hogan Street that terrible day in 1960 belonged to Johnny Holden.

He became one of many black bystanders running for their lives in downtown Jacksonville. Now 94, his memory is still vivid. He fled down Hogan Street, turned on Monroe, ducking behind crowds until he saw the Boomerangs, a gang of black youth who showed up to fight back.

At 44, he couldn't be among the students and young people who joined the nascent civil rights movement as a wave of lunch counter sit-ins began in 1960.

"Older people, we couldn't come out and say what we wanted because we'd lose our jobs," Holden said. "If it hadn't been for the youth, [civil rights] wouldn't have moved as fast as it did."

Perhaps to Holden, the changes seemed to come lightning quick. To others, they would be a long time in the making.

The focus of civil rights history in Jacksonville has been on the violence of Ax Handle Saturday. Yet a resolution would come much later. The demonstrations ceased after Aug. 27 but resumed later in the fall, continuing for months. It wasn't until the following spring, in 1961, that lunch counters downtown agreed to integrate.

Government parks and schools would follow, but much more slowly. Segregationist policies would continue for years - and 1960 would not be the last time violence and rioting erupted over civil rights.

While news of Ax Handle Saturday was splashed around the country, the events of that time have not been very well known locally, said James Crooks, a professor emeritus at the University of North Florida who has written extensively about the city's history.

Outlets from Life Magazine to The St. Petersburg Times covered the events. On Aug. 28, a front page story in The New York Times led with, "Angry bands of club-swinging whites clashed with Negroes in the streets of downtown Jacksonville today."

Yet the events were barely covered in the local mainstream press, including the Times-Union and Jacksonville Journal.

Crooks ranks Ax Handle Saturday alongside the Great Fire of 1901 and city-county consolidation as a turning point in Jacksonville's history.

The 40th anniversary, in 2000, was the first formal citywide commemoration of the day.

As Crooks recalls it, both blacks and whites questioned the commemoration. The Jacksonville Historical Society's decision to participate, he said, passed by a slim margin. "A lot of people didn't want to put it on, they said why are you raising up hurtful memories?"

Although painful, Crooks said, it was a successful effort.

"It was almost like lancing a boil," he said. "You had a sense that, OK, we were now ready to face our history."

And over the years, facing that "checkered history" has been more difficult for some than others.

Only a few people who responded to the Times-Union's call for memories of those demonstrations recounted being on the segregationist side of the fight. None would agree to be interviewed or even give their names.

Perhaps the measure of shifting attitudes lies in the invisibility of those who swung ax handles that day, Crooks said. Or perhaps, as Yates believes, it's a tip of the scales toward a generation that knows only the Desert Rider, and not the Woolworth's.

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